



[N F S Grundtvig, 1783–1872](#)

Grundtvig, Message, Achievement and Comparisons

N F S Grundtvig built a nation, peacefully, through education.

This is a large but reasonable claim.

Not that Grundtvig built any folk high schools. But he was the “vanguard” of the folk-high-school movement and of the corresponding mass democratic movement that made Denmark the nation that it is.

Grundtvig’s message, in the excerpts that we are using, is made up of a few simple juxtapositions. The Dead and the Living. The Latin and the Danish. Development and Enlightenment *versus* their opposites. This is a dialectical method and therefore, a developmental method, where “development” is taken in the Hegelian sense.

German war on Denmark

In South Africa, we speak of People's Education for People's Power. We speak of Education for Liberation. This is in the context of our liberation struggle against apartheid and "colonialism of a special type". Denmark also had a political context of national liberation.

Denmark is adjacent to the much more powerful state of Germany, which made war on Denmark in 1864, and seized the Danish Province of Schleswig-Holstein. This event caused a sense of great urgency in the mass education movement in Denmark. Education had become a matter of survival. Revival of old national symbols would not be enough to sustain national cohesion.

What these Danes successfully negotiated in the 19th Century is in many ways analogous to what is happening now in South Africa, and in other countries, and the theories of Grundtvig are comparable to those of other liberation educationalists (and by the way, just to mention: liberation theologians, as well).

Freire and Tagore Compared to Grundtvig

A world-wide sense of crisis in education has stimulated continuing interest in the general provision of educational service to the existing populations as a whole.

In Cuba, there is talk of "The nation becoming a university", and

we will look at that in our next item.

Our own South African “Communist University” is another such attempt.

We continue to look for other examples, and other strands of discourse to learn from.

One of these is the Grundtvigian scholarship that continues to be centred on Denmark, but with correspondents around the world. The Danish language in which much of this special dialogue has taken place over the last two centuries remains a barrier. Grundtvig’s own extensive writings, speeches and sermons are hardly published in English at all. We are lucky to have access the one-volume collection called “The School for Life”, plus some copies of learned specialist magazines that have some articles in English.

Some of these compare Grundtvig’s approach in popular education to that of Paulo Freire, author of “The Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, and to that of [Rabindranath Tagore](#), the famous exponent and moderniser of Bengali culture, who was also a contemporary, friend and collaborator of M K Gandhi’s.

These comparisons are helpful. The three are complementary. Comparison illuminates by contrast the peculiar positive characteristics of each of them (this was also Grundtvig’s view).

What they all had in common was that they gave tactical substance to the strategic impetus towards general education

of their respective populations as a whole.

Freire

The Brazilian, Paulo Freire, who was strongly associated with the mid-to-late 20th-century “Liberation Theology” movement centred on South America, with both Protestant and Catholic strands, confronted a similar problematic to the one that faced Grundtvig.

This was a peasant or “campesino” population, left behind, in a situation where an older order was crumbling.

The Communist University has relied upon the teachings of Paulo Freire from its beginning, and we have dealt, separately and in more depth during this course, with Freire’s particular contribution.

Here, we can remark that Freire’s dialogical principle of education corresponds almost exactly to the Grundtvigian statement provided at the top of the introduction to the previous item (noting of course that the statement comes from Wikipedia, and not from Grundtvig’s own pen).

What is different is Freire’s reference to the political oppression of the learners. Freire says that education cannot properly happen without constant, consistent recognition of the oppressive circumstances surrounding the educational initiative and process. We take that from Freire.

Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore was the one out of these three who, as a relatively wealthy man, started and funded a school from his own pocket – [Patha Bhavana](#) at [Santiniketan](#). Whether its principles were similar to those of Grundtvig and Freire is hard to tell. Patha Bhavana does seem to have owed a lot to Tagore's rather idiosyncratic and spontaneous inspirations, varying from time to time.

What Tagore seems to have done in general in his life is to bring his own exquisite and highly-developed Brahmin culture to the masses of Bengal.

Particularly in terms of the songs that he wrote, and which became enormously and lastingly popular, Tagore is credited with creating a modern (Bengali) nation through education and culture.

This is really what Tagore has in common with Grundtvig and with Freire, and what is most useful for our CU course on education. Because we are seeking by any and every means possible, to expand the common and general culture of the South African population.

Summary, on formality and informality

In South Africa we find a relentless and apparently insurmountable urge to destroy the informal and to replace it with the formal. This is not only in education, but it is especially

strong in the field of education. It is something shared between the old and the new regimes of South Africa, pre-and post-1994.

For communists, who seek a society without class, and therefore without a state, the rush towards the formal and away from self-management is dismaying. But in practice the informal, the general, is the stuff of daily life and cannot in that sense be suppressed. Nor is formal education going to be suppressed. What N F S Grundtvig showed was that the formal and the informal could co-exist, and that it was necessary for them to do so. This was the foundation of the Danish nation.

The Communist University has never been sponsored, but it has always been supported by learners. It is informal in the way of the Danish folk-high-schools.

The struggle continues.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The School for Life, 1838, N F S Grundtvig, Excerpt #2.](#)
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